

## Are kangaroos indigenous to Wilsons Promontory National Park?

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### Abstract

The current population of Eastern Grey Kangaroos *Macropus giganteus* on Wilsons Promontory National Park are descendants of nine animals released in the park in 1910 and 1912. Immediately prior to that there were no kangaroos in the park. There is much historic evidence to suggest that there have never been kangaroos on the Prom, but there is also one piece of information that indicates that there were kangaroos there in the second half of the 19th century. This paper draws together historic records and discusses the evidence for and against kangaroos being indigenous to the Prom. Although not conclusive, the evidence is compelling in the negative. (*The Victorian Naturalist* 125 (6) 2008, 172-177)

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### Introduction

Wilsons Promontory National Park (the Prom) is located in South Gippsland, approximately 200 kilometres south-east of Melbourne. The Prom from south of Darby River was temporarily reserved as a national park in 1898 following nearly two decades of intense lobbying, led by the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria (FNCV). The park has been the subject of much research and study by field naturalists and scientists since that time.

The current population of Eastern Grey Kangaroos *Macropus giganteus* are descendants of nine animals released in the park in 1910 and 1912. The fact that there were no kangaroos on the Prom when it was first reserved is not in question (Meagher and Kohout 2001). All historical records, surveys and oral histories of the time are unequivocal on this point (Kershaw 1906). Earlier naturalists, explorers and archaeological records suggest that there have never been kangaroos on the Prom but one suggests the contrary. An article in the *Medical Journal of Australia* recounts a walking expedition undertaken by Fred Bird to the Prom in 1879 (Bird 1926) where he remarked on kangaroos around the Yanakie Homestead near the current park entrance.

### History

To understand the history of kangaroos on the Prom we first need to understand the geomorphology and history of land use.

The promontory is connected to the mainland by a narrow neck of land called the Yanakie Isthmus. Formed around 6000 years ago by drifting sand, the isthmus separates Corner Inlet from Waratah Bay/Shallow Inlet. Within the Park it represents an area of 6500 ha between the current Park boundary in the north and Darby River in the south. This is the country that the kangaroos now inhabit. A further 6880 ha of farmed country to the north of the Park completes what is known as the Yanakie Isthmus (Fig.1).

Three distinct geological zones on the isthmus collectively form an area that in the 19th century constituted 'The Yanakie Run.' These zones are:

1. The acid sands airstrip area in the south (Darby River to Five-Mile Road), which the vast majority of kangaroos currently occupy;
2. The calcareous dune country between Five-Mile Road and the current park entrance;
3. The farmland between the current park boundary and an east-west line approximately 10 km north of the current park boundary, which formed the northern extremity of the isthmus.

Although the Prom was first temporarily reserved in 1898, the Yanakie Isthmus section (southern end of the Run) was added to the Park only in 1969. From the mid-1800s the isthmus was managed as a graz-

## YANAKIE ISTHMUS

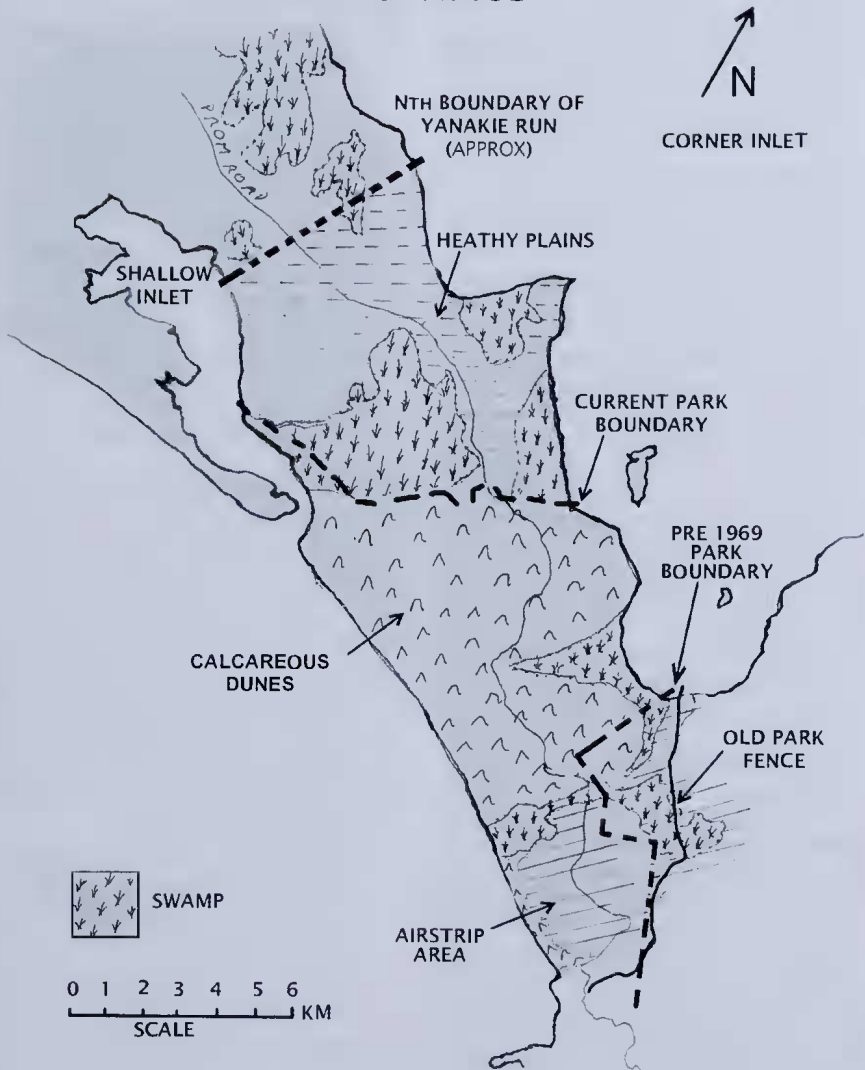


Fig. 1. Yanakie Isthmus.

ing lease, and cattle grazing continued in the park until 1992.

Early references by FNCV members and other visitors predominantly relate to land within the park, i.e. the country south of the old park fence, which spanned a disjointed line between Millers Landing and Darby River (Fig.1). Most of the grassy woodland country was outside this fence

but did include some of the Airstrip area. The 1905/06 FNCV excursion passed through this area. A biological survey map showed the route of the 1905/06 expedition down the middle of the Isthmus (Hardy 1906). Hardy's report stated 'We saw nothing and could hear nothing of the Kangaroo ...' and Kershaw (1906) wrote 'Kangaroos do not seem to exist on the

promontory'. Their records are very clear that there were no kangaroos in the park at that time.

There were other grassy areas in the park that were suitable for kangaroos at that time, but were also devoid of them:

In a few places there is good grass land, notably at Derby River and easterly from Oberon Bay; the parts suitable for kangaroo and emu amount to about 2000 acres ... The total amount of grazing land, [on the Prom] of good and medium quality, such as would support kangaroos ... would be perhaps 10,000 acres ...' (Hardy 1906: 195).

The initial reservation of the Prom in 1898 provided sanctuary for Australian animals, even those not indigenous to the area (Gillbank 1998a). In 1910 a pair of kangaroos was introduced into the park by the Victorian Acclimatisation Society (Seebeck and Mansergh 1998), followed in 1912 with a further seven animals from Woodside (Kershaw 1915; Meagher and Kohout 2001; Wescott 1998). These animals remained captive behind fences at Darby River:

In October 1936 another kind donor presented a Major Mitchell Cockatoo and this gift seems to have started the Committee toying with the idea of having an aviary built as a companion to its kangaroo paddock. (Garnett 1971)

The kangaroos remained behind wire until the fence was burnt down around 1938 and they escaped (I Park, P Gilbert, pers. comm. 2005)<sup>1</sup>. From such low numbers, and subject to dingo attack and hunting by humans, they would have taken some years to establish a viable population. Even when the *National Parks (Amendment) Act 1969* added part of the Yanakie Isthmus to the park, kangaroos were apparently not well established. Frankenberg (1971) records that:

Although grazing is still permitted, the native vegetation is of great interest, and Yanakie may in time become a useful habitat for Kangaroo and Emu.

Casual observers of the current high population of kangaroos around the airstrip area may find it hard to imagine why there would not have always been a resident population. This country was once heavily timbered and not suitable for kangaroos until the trees were ringbarked and cleared

in the early part of last century. The following was recorded in the FNCV Club excursion leader's report on a walk between Millers Landing and Darby River December 1914:

About two Miles and a half from the Darby the track enters what was at one time a thickly-timbered flat, extending across the tea-tree covered sand-dunes which margin the ocean beach. Most of the timber, which consisted of principally fair-sized eucalypts, with a few scattered Blackwoods, has been ringed, only their whitened skeletons remain to show what once had been.

Only a few years ago the Koala, or Native Bears were numerous, and could be seen here at any time. Wallabies, Dingoes and the introduced Hog Deer, [*Axis porcinus*] were also common ... (Kershaw 1913: 171)

### **The evidence for kangaroos being indigenous to the Prom**

The only evidence located that refers to kangaroos on the Prom prior to 1910 is that of Fred D Bird, in a paper that he read at a meeting of the Melbourne Medical Association on September 20 1928, about a walking trip he made to the Prom 50 years earlier (1879), as a third year medical student. During his walk Bird stayed at the Yanakie Homestead which was situated near the current Park entrance. In reference to the sand-dune country around the Homestead he states boldly:

The country, not much of which could be seen at a time, looked as if it would carry minus something of a sheep to the acre, but there were many sheep and a startling superfluity of Kangaroos. They ranged in their hundreds, even in their thousands. Each subsequent visit showed us fewer Kangaroos and now I believe they are extinct in these parts (Bird 1926: 681).

There are four points that can be made about this statement by Bird:

1. The paper runs to some 6500 words and throughout, the only mention of wildlife is the one Bird makes about kangaroos and wallabies. From that, one could deduce that natural history was not one of his strong interests. Bird could have been referring to Swamp Wallabies *Wallabia bicolor* which are prevalent on the Isthmus,

though he does also refer to wallabies in his paper.

2. Given the time between the trip and writing the article (50 years), his memory may have let him down and he could have been recalling other country he had travelled through. His route did take him through Andersons Inlet and Tarwin Lower, which would have been similar country in those days.
3. Bird says that he walked from the Yanakie Homestead to the Prom lighthouse via the coast and Oberon Bay in one (very hot), day where he stayed with the lighthouse keeper. Given that this is a distance of some 50 km, much of it without tracks, one could question his recollection. Also, that particular expedition was in 1879 yet the FNCV visit, five years later, was heralded as the first overland visit to the Lighthouse (Gregory 1885). A telegraph line was completed from Foster to the Lighthouse in 1873 (Sparkes 1997), so the associated access track would have facilitated the journey for both Bird and the FNCV.
4. His recall may be perfect and there were many kangaroos on the isthmus in 1879 but, according to an old agister from the area, 'there were never any kangaroos on the Isthmus or the country back to Fish Creek'. (Meeme Farrell pers.comm). Meeme settled in Fish Creek in 1899 and agisted cattle on the Prom and the Yanakie Run until his death in the early 1980s.

#### **The evidence against kangaroos being indigenous to the Prom**

At the time of Bird's visit, William Millar managed the Yanakie Run. Bird mentions staying with William Millar at the Yanakie Homestead on a number of occasions. Millar came to the run in 1867 as a bookkeeper for the then manager, John McHaffie (Clemson 1983). A short time later he took over the run and managed it until 1893. He was a meticulous bookkeeper (Crawford 1984).

Jim Millar, a direct descendant of William, has William's diaries and daybooks from the homestead in his possession. He has read the documents extensively

and has made the following points (pers. comm.).

- In its early days the Run carried 17 000 head of sheep, which produced more than 100 bales of wool annually. The country could not have supported that number of sheep as well as a large kangaroo population.
- William Miller was an avid hunter and owned a number of fine firearms. To shoot many kangaroos would have required a lot of ammunition. There are no entries in the daybooks of large purchases of ammunition or discussions in the diaries regarding extermination of any native animals.
- Even if there had been extensive hunting of kangaroos at that time, it is unlikely that every single one of them would have been shot (Jim Millar pers. comm. 2004)

In the 1960s, Peter Coutts undertook extensive archaeological research on the Yanakie Isthmus (Coutts 1970). He concluded that kangaroos were not part of the diet of Aborigines who visited the Prom and he found no evidence of kangaroos in the excavations of middens. He did find Swamp Wallaby and Common Wombat *Vombatus ursinus*.

A number of oral histories and historical journals discuss life on the Yanakie Run. T Musgrave was the son of Captain Thomas Musgrave who was the Prom Lighthouse Keeper, appointed in 1869. As a 12-year-old, T Musgrave junior recalls travelling through Yanakie Station, 'which then carried around 17 000 head of sheep.' Musgrave joined the Yanakie Station in 1874 and worked there for about 20 years. He talks of the excitement of musters on the Yanakie Run and how one of his jobs was to take the mail etc. down to the Lighthouse once a week. This is around the same time as Bird's first visit. There is no mention of kangaroos throughout his memoirs (Musgrave 1940).

William Clemson was a Crown Land Bailiff and was responsible for administering the Yanakie Run from 1909. William's son, Ken, documented an oral history of the Yanakie Run and there is no mention of Kangaroos in the document (Clemson 1983).



These unpublished documents are available in the Wilsons Promontory Park Library. Neither of them mentions kangaroos as being present on the Prom. Whilst this is not conclusive evidence in itself it is at least indicative that kangaroos were not on the isthmus in the latter half of the 19th century.

Baron Ferdinand von Mueller was the Victorian Government Botanist for the second half of the 19th century. Mueller visited Wilsons Promontory in the 1850s and knew of the cattle station at Yanakie (The Yanakie Run) in 1853 (Gillbank 1998b). Many visitors of the time stayed at the Yanakie Homestead during their trips to the park. There is no evidence to suggest Mueller actually visited the Run but he did explore other parts of the Prom, including Sealers Cove where he stayed with the saw-millers. In 1874 he is recorded as staying at the Lighthouse (Gillbank 1998b).

In 1887, as president of the Royal Geographical Society, he was invited to lend support to the FNCV to lobby the government to reserve Wilsons Promontory as a national park. Although Mueller was a botanist, he would have been heavily involved in developing the argument for this reservation with other members of the FNCV, including Arthur Lucas, George Robinson, and John Gregory. These three men undertook a walking trip to Wilsons Promontory in 1885 (Ducker 1998). They also stayed with Millar at the Yanakie Homestead on this expedition to explore and report on the natural history of the proposed National Park.

Mueller visited the Prom 26 years before Bird, and on a number of occasions afterwards. Many other naturalists visited during that period, and the Lucas expedition was there only five years after Bird's first visit (Gillbank 1998a). Despite all of that, there were no records of kangaroos on the Prom and many references to the fact that kangaroos were absent. Surely, with all of those naturalists discussing the importance of preserving the Prom at that time, some mention would have been made of the reasons for the demise of the kangaroos if any had been there originally?

### Possible reasons why kangaroos did not exist on the Prom

As indicated above, a close examination of the landforms and land use may provide clues to why kangaroos were not present on the Prom prior to 1910.

The country north of the current park boundary was deeply transected by thickly vegetated *Melaleuca* sp and wet heath swamps. The limited higher ground was covered in dense heathland. This sort of habitat was ideal for Swamp Wallabies but of no value to kangaroos until it was cleared by graziers and later drained and cleared for soldier settlement in the 1950s (Crawford 1984).

The sand dune country between the park entrance and around 5-mile Road was theoretically suitable for kangaroos, with many open grassy areas. However, as early as 1880 it was recognised that calcareous soils are highly alkaline. Alkalinity reduces the availability of micronutrients such as iron, copper, zinc and manganese (Chesterfield 1998; Parsons and Specht 1967). This leads to a nutritional problem termed 'Coasty Disease' or enzootic ataxia, which causes a wasting condition in ruminants such as sheep and deer. Ruminants have a higher requirement for cobalt than non-ruminant species, such as horses and rabbits. Studies of calcareous, coastal sand dunes of Kangaroo Island, South Australia, found that both copper and cobalt are deficient in the pastures of affected areas, and sheep required mineral supplements to survive (Underwood 1967). Kangaroos have a 'pseudo-ruminant' digestive system, and may also be limited by mineral deficiencies in these alkaline coastal soils. An extensive literature search has failed to reveal any supportive scientific evidence for this hypothesis (Davis pers. comm. 2007). Some anecdotal evidence exists for kangaroos being susceptible to Coastly Disease (Pers comm. Gilbert 2005, I Park 2005) but these observations have not been tested.

With this in mind it is possible that the sand dune country of the isthmus is not suitable to support kangaroos for any length of time. This argument is supported by the current situation where we have a

large kangaroo population on the acid soil airstrip area and only sparse numbers on the alkaline calcareous dune country.

The airstrip area was heavily timbered until the early 1900s (Kershaw 1914), so was not suitable for kangaroos until it was cleared.

In essence, the only land on the Prom suitable for Kangaroos prior to 1910 was Darby River, Norman Bay, Oberon Bay and Entrance Point (Hardy 1906). The nature of the country flanked by Corner Inlet and Waratah Bay/Shallow Inlet formed a natural barrier to kangaroos accessing this country.

### Conclusion

If there were kangaroos on the Prom in the 1800s we have to consider what could have led to their local extinction by 1910? Fire is unlikely to have totally destroyed the population. Even if it had, they would have recolonised relatively quickly from areas outside the park, assuming there was a local population to recolonise from. Disease is another possibility, but, again unlikely to cause local extinction. The same can be said for shooting or poisoning as a cause of extinction.

The evidence (factual and circumstantial) against kangaroos being indigenous to the park is strong and consists of archaeological reports, FNCV surveys, nature writings, oral histories and other historic records. Only one obscure reference indicates that kangaroos may have been indigenous. In the absence of corroborating evidence for that single reference, it can be concluded that kangaroos are probably not indigenous to Wilsons Promontory National Park.

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### Note

<sup>1</sup>Ian Park is a farmer from Hoddle in South Gippsland, and a long time agister on the Yanakie Isthmus. Perce Gilbert was caretaker of the Yanakie Airstrip following the second world war, and a former Agistment Ranger and Ranger-in-Charge at Wilsons Promontory National Park.

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